



Green Timber Tree Farm Group Standard Operation Procedure



Note: Number system is consistent with “Manual for Group Organizations; Group Managers and Group Members.” This document was used as a template and at times entire sections were copied.

Section 1. Introduction

1.1 History of Tree Farm Certification

The American Tree Farm System[®] (ATFS) was founded in 1941 as a way for private forest owners to learn how to sustainably manage their forests. By 1944, the ATFS was certifying the nation’s private forests as a way to assure both the United States Congress and the public that the forests were being renewed and managed in a sustainable manner.

Over the past sixty years, the ATFS has grown and continued to improve and now includes over 60,000 certified properties that currently represent approximately 26 million acres. All of the certifications of conformance with the American Forest Foundation Standard have been individual certifications conducted by a volunteer force of professional inspecting foresters.

Over the past ten years, the concept of certification of “Good Forestry” by a professional forester that is embodied in the American Tree Farm System has gained a substantial following, both within the U.S. and internationally. With the increased interest in forest certification by the global forest products industry, customers, and other non-governmental organizations, the ATFS has experienced renewed interest.

1.2 The AFF Standards of Sustainability for Forest Certification

The American Forest Foundation (AFF) 2010-2015 Standards of Sustainability for Forest Certification were approved by the AFF Board of Trustees on November 3rd, 2009. The 2010-2015 Standards were developed by an independent panel of experts, representing academia, conservation organizations, Federal and State governments, landowners, and foresters. Bob Simpson, AFF Senior Vice President for Forestry, said "Although our ATFS certification program is the oldest in America, founded in 1941, we are constantly working to improve our standards to make them fit new conservation forestry practices and consumer expectations. Consumers want to be able to rely on green brands, and the ATFS brand continues to grow in stature and acceptance."



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1.3 The Challenge of Forest Certification

For the past sixty years, the American Tree Farm System has conducted individual audits of family forest owners using a large cadre of volunteer foresters from forest products companies, consulting firms, service foresters from state agencies, and others. The number of landowners that can enter into the program has been constrained by the limited auditor pool and the steadily increasing number of small family forest owners. The number of family forest owners is now well over ten million and the potential for more to seek certification to the AFF Standards is growing.

Individual family forest owners and other qualified participants are also confronted with the challenge that they do not have ready access to information on certification programs, the number of volunteer professional foresters is decreasing due to public agency budget cuts and consolidation within the forest and paper industry. At the same time, environmental organizations and buyers of wood and paper products are promoting the broader certification of private lands.

A Group Certification approach for family forest owners in the U.S. is an attractive and efficient way to address the broader demand for forest certification. The challenge, as always, is to demonstrate to family forest owners that there is value in Group Certification and that the benefits will exceed the costs and the perceived threats to their independence and private property rights.

1.4 ATFS Group Certification

As part of continuous improvement to respond to the above challenges, ATFS has developed a “Group Certification Process.” ATFS Group Certification is the process of evaluating and certifying groups of forest owners under a single Tree Farm certificate. Group Certification allows individual family forest owners and other qualified participants to benefit from the many “economies of scale” of being part of a larger group, as well as the services that are provided at a reasonable cost.

Section 2. The Benefits of the American Tree Farm System Group Certification

ATFS Group Certification has a number of benefits that accrue to the individual Group Members, Group Organizations of family forest owners, and the customers of wood and paper products. These benefits generally include facilitating the flow of information to landowners, maintaining market access, improving forest management practices, reducing the overall costs of forest certification for landowners, and assuring customers and the public that landowners are practicing sustainable forestry. In addition, Group



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Members enjoy all of the rights and benefits of individual Tree Farmers. These benefits of Group Certification will be described in more detail below.

2.1 Technical Assistance to Family Forest Owners

Family forest owners are often in need of technical assistance and advice from a professional forester. Forest owners are generally not professionally trained in the forest sciences and may not live directly on or near the property. They need the assistance of a professional in inventorying the forest, determining market value, contracting for forestry services, developing a management plan, and marketing their timber.

Family forest owners also want to do business with reputable and trained professional loggers to ensure that their forestry operations are appropriately conducted. They may also want their lands managed according to a Standard of Forest Sustainability to ensure that water quality, wildlife, recreation, and other benefits of the forest are taken into consideration, along with the production of timber.

Joining a Group Organization is one way for family forest owners to come together to share information, benefit from professional technical assistance provided by a Group Organization, and gain mutual support for managing to an internationally accepted Standard of Forest Sustainability, like the AFF Standards.

2.2 Improving Forest Management

Access to professional forestry advice, contracting with competent loggers, and implementing state-of-the-art forest management practices has the added benefit of improving forest management and maintaining the long-term productivity of the land. Family forest owners universally want to leave the land in a better condition than when they purchased it. Working within a larger Group Organization facilitates the adoption of best practices and reinforces the Tree Farm “Land Ethic.”

Broad implementation of sustainable forestry practices also increases the credibility and professionalism of the entire forestry community. Improved credibility with the public and policy makers will tend to reduce pressure for overly burdensome government laws and regulation. Thus, improving the practice of sustainable forestry makes good business sense as well as improves environmental quality.

2.3 Economies of Scale

ATFS Group Organizations offer individual family forest owners and qualified participants the advantage of economies of scale. Efficiencies can be gained by acquiring the services of a forestry-consulting firm that provides land management planning, timber sale administration, and other forestry services and advice.



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Qualified participants may be part of a forest products company's landowner assistance or family forestry program where services are provided at low or no cost. They may also participate in a cooperative of private lands managed according to one management plan with services provided by a Group Manager(s).

In the above examples, Group Organizations made up of many qualified participants may find it in their best interests to certify their forest management and services under the ATFS Group Certification Program in order to demonstrate and document sustainable forestry. The economies of scale of a large group can help keep the costs of forest certification within reach of family forest owners and other qualified participants.

2.4 Assuring Customers of Sustainable Forest Management

Group Members of a certified organization would be in a position to provide certified wood products into the domestic and international market place. ATFS Group Certification can also help address the goals of landowners, as well as wood and paper product users and customers, in broadening the practice of sustainable forestry. A number of customers of wood and paper products and buyer's groups want their purchases of wood to be from sustainably managed forests, but recognize the difficulty and cost associated with individual forest certification. Thus, ATFS Group Certification of a large number of family forest owners helps address the logistical and cost constraints of certification, while satisfying the demand for wood certified to an internationally accepted Standard of Forest Sustainability.

ATFS Group Certification offers advantages to individual landowners, land management organizations and assistance programs, and the buyers and consumers of wood and paper products. Ultimately, ATFS Group Certification will benefit the environment as water quality, fish and wildlife, forest health, aesthetics, etc. are increasingly taken into consideration and protected.

Section 3. The Group Organization

3.1 Legal Requirements

The Green Timber Tree Farm Group is organized as a program of Green Timber Consulting Foresters, Inc.

Green Timber Consulting Foresters, Inc.

11521 DesRochers Road

Pelkie, MI 49958

Office: (906) 353-8584

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The Group Manager for the Green Timber Tree Farm Group is:

Rexx A. Janowiak
Consulting Forester
Green Timber Consulting Foresters, Inc.

3.2 Roles and Responsibilities

3.2.1 Group Organization

The Green Timber Tree Farm Group is organized as a program of Green Timber Consulting Foresters, Inc.

3.2.2 Eligibility

The following is a list of eligibility requirements of the Green Timber Tree Farm Group. This list can also be found at (GO-12).

1. Forest owner must have a written forest management plan for the property to be enrolled. The forest management plan must be active, adaptive and embody the landowner's current objectives, remain appropriate for the land certified, and reflect the current state of knowledge about forestry and natural resource management. The forest management plan must clearly state landowner's objectives, describe desired forest conditions, include management activities aimed at reaching the desired forest conditions and landowner's objectives, document a feasible strategy for activity implementation, and include a tract map accurately depicting significant forest related resources. Where present and relevant to the property, the forest management plan must address the following resource elements: forest health, soil, water, wood and fiber production, threatened and endangered species, special sites, invasive species, integrated pest management and high conservation value forests.
2. Forest owner must achieve the American Forest Foundation (AFF) standards of sustainable forestry (2010 – 2015 edition)
3. Forest owner must intend to maintain the property in forest cover and remain a member of the Green Timber Tree Farm Group for the foreseeable future.
4. Forest owner must allow access to the property for the group manager and/or an independent certification body in order to assess conformance with the AFF standards.
5. The property owned must be within Michigan's Upper Peninsula or the Wisconsin counties of Marinette, Florence, Forest, Vilas, Iron or Douglas.
6. The property owned must consist of 10 or more contiguous forested acres and shall not exceed 20,000 acres.



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7. Forest owner must agree to use Green Timber Consulting Foresters, Inc. or a pre-approved alternative service for all forest management needs.
8. Forest owner must agree to pay a yearly due of \$50.00 to Green Timber Consulting Foresters, Inc.
9. Landowner must be the true legal owner of the property and the timber located within the property.

3.2.3 Group Managers

The **Group Manager(s)** administers the affairs of the Group Organization and is generally an employee(s) or representative(s) of the Group Organization. The Group Manager, or his/her designee, maintains the records of the Group Organization, processes applications for membership in the Group Organization, conducts pre-inspections of prospective Group Members, conducts ongoing monitoring of conformance of the Group Members with the AFF Standards, applies for Group Certification, selects an accredited Certification Body to conduct the certification audit, represents the Group Organization throughout the audit process, maintains the ATFS Group Certificate on behalf of the Group Organization, and controls the claims that the Group Organization can make. The Group Manager is also responsible for ensuring timely reporting and payment of fees to ATFS. The responsibilities of the Group Manager may be shared with any number of personnel within the Group Organization.

3.2.4 Group members

The **Group Members** are the family forest owners and qualified participants that collectively make up the Group Organization and are required to meet the requirements of the AFF Standards. Group Members that voluntary choose to participate in Group Certification can include their lands in the Group Certificate and enjoy all of the benefits and privileges of being a Certified Tree Farmer. Group Members can serve on committees and task groups of the Group Organization, including Appeals and Dispute Resolution Committees.

3.3 Group Membership Fees

The Green Timber Tree Farm Group fees will be included in the Mutual Understanding document attached to the Application for Membership (GO -01). Any changes in the fee structure will be communicated via US-Mail and/or E-Mail at least 3 months in advance of the change.

No fee will be charged for a tree farm sign. The Michigan Tree Farm Committee has indicated that they will provide a tree farm sign to all qualified Tree Farmers. Green Timber Consulting Foresters, Inc. will help facilitate this process.



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3.4 Landowner Entry and Departure from the Group Organization

The Group Manager will administer the process for Group Member entry into, and departure from, the Group Organization. If a landowner is interested in becoming a member of the Green Timber Tree Farm Group they should contact Green Timber Consulting Foresters, Inc. and request form (GO-01) Application for Membership. The first half of this form is a series of question that helps to determine the eligibility of the potential group member. The second half is the Mutual Understanding which lays out the responsibilities of Green Timber Consulting Foresters, Inc. and the responsibilities of the individual group member as the relate to the Green Timber Tree Farm Group. All fees that the individual group member will be required to pay will be laid out in the Mutual Understanding form.

Prior to group certification all members of the Green Timber Tree Farm Group will be notified with a letter enclosed with the application that they are joining the “Charter” Green Timber Tree Farm Group. This letter will also inform the group members that once group certification is achieved they and their tree farm will be subject to all of the requirements specified for ATFS Group Certification. Members that join after group certification is achieved will be informed of the requirements specified for ATFS Group Certification in form (GO-01), Application for Membership.

3.5 Internal Dispute Resolution Process

The Group Manager will strive to resolve any disputes in a collegial and professional manner. Should informal efforts to resolve a dispute be insufficient the internal dispute resolution process is:

1. All parties involved in the dispute will be required to document in writing the issues that are causing the dispute.
2. The written views will then be submitted to the group manager so that copies can be made and placed in their respective landowner files. Individual group members are encouraged to keep a copy of their written views before sending a copy to the group manager.
3. It is then required that within 15 days of receiving all written views that the group manager makes copies of the written views and distributes them to the Dispute Resolution Committee. The Dispute Resolution Committee will be comprised of voluntary members from within the group. This committee shall not exceed a maximum number of 7 participants.
4. The Dispute Resolution Committee will then be given 30 days to investigate the dispute and render a binding resolution on all parties.
5. All findings of the Dispute Resolution Committee are final and cannot be appealed.



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6. If it so happens that a member of the Dispute Resolution Committee is directly involved with a dispute then he/she will not be allowed to participate in the Dispute Resolution Committee as they over see that particular issue.

The Dispute Resolution Process is outlined in form (GO-16), Dispute/Appeals Procedure.

3.6 Background Information and Materials

The membership application will clearly reference the internet site where the AFF Standards of Sustainability for Forest Certification of Private Forests can be found. In addition the application will clearly state that the Green Timber Tree Farm Group manager will provide a copy upon request.

Section 4. The Group Manager

The Group Manager(s) for the Group Organization has the major responsibility for administering the Group, ensuring that the AFF Standards are being implemented and achieved, accepting new Group Members into the existing Group Organization and guiding the Group Organization and its members through the ATFS Group Certification Process.

4.1 Interpretation and Application of the AFF Standards

An important responsibility of the Group Manager is to understand and interpret the AFF Standards in the context of the Group Organization. Thus, the Group Manager must interpret and appropriately apply the AFF Standards in the context of the Group Organization and be able to clearly explain the requirements to the Group Members. The Green Timber Tree Farm Group Manager will review and understand the AFF Standards and will relay this information to the group members though oral and written communication. The AFF Standards will also be available for the group members.

4.2 Membership in the Group Organization

The Group Manager must provide initial information to prospective new Group Members regarding the application process and entry into the Group Organization. An application package will be assembled and sent to new perspective Group Members that includes a copy of the AFF Standards, the Application for Membership and mutual agreement form (GO-01), and the eligibility requirements to become a group member, form (GO-12).



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4.3 Management Plan

The AFF Standards of Sustainability for Forest Certification of Private Lands (P&P-01) require Group Members to have a written forest management plan consistent with the scope and scale of forestry operations on the property. Group Members should work with consulting foresters, state agency service foresters, or other qualified natural resource professionals to prepare management plans for their property.

The forest management plan must be active, adaptive and embody the landowner's current objectives, remain appropriate for the land certified, and reflect the current state of knowledge about forestry and natural resource management. The forest management plan must clearly state landowner's objectives, describe desired forest conditions, include management activities aimed at reaching the desired forest conditions and landowner's objectives, document a feasible strategy for activity implementation, and include a tract map accurately depicting significant forest related resources. Where present and relevant to the property, the forest management plan must address the following resource elements: forest health, soil, water, wood and fiber production, threatened and endangered species, special sites, invasive species, integrated pest management and high conservation value forests.

The Green Timber Tree Farm Group Group Manager will ensure that each individual member has an updated management plan for their tree farm. A copy of the management plan will be kept on file by the Group Manager.

4.4 Application for Membership

The Group Organization *must* have a procedure defining its application process and a means for ensuring that the applicant and potential lands to be enrolled are eligible and managed in a manner consistent with the AFF Standards. The procedure should include a signed application or statement of commitment by the qualified participant, evidence of a written management plan, and the consent of the qualified participant to allow access to the property for purposes of internal and external inspection.

An application package will be assembled and sent to new perspective Group Members that includes a copy of the AFF Standards, the formal Application for Membership, form (GO-01), and the eligibility requirements to become a group member, form (GO-12).

The application will then be reviewed to determine if the perspective group member is qualified for the Green Timber Tree Farm Group. If the membership application appears to be complete, the Group Manager or his/her designated representative may conduct an on-site inspection of the property.



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4.5 Pre-Inspection and Approval of New Group Members

The Group Manager should schedule a meeting or phone call with the new applicant or his/her representative to determine if the applicant meets the requirements of the Group Organization and the AFF Standards. The meeting or phone call should include a review of the requirements of the Group, as well as the requirements of the AFF Standards. An ATFS qualified inspector should conduct any on-site inspection or meeting.

The ATFS qualified inspector is encouraged to use the AFF Standards Monitoring Checklist (GO-04) or equivalent procedure to document that each of the AFF Standards and Core Performance Measures are met. Where a non-conformance is identified and documented on the AFF Standards Monitoring Checklist, the inspector is urged to complete the Corrective Action Request (CAR) form (GO-06), or equivalent procedure. The applicant should be instructed to address each of the non-conformances and complete the section of the CAR form that addresses the Corrective Action Plan. The Corrective Action Plan should be reviewed, approved and signed by the ATFS qualified inspector or Group Manager.

It is important that the new applicant achieve the applicable requirements of the AFF Standards prior to entry into the Group Organization. Entry into the Group Organization signifies that the applicant is actively implementing and achieving the AFF Standards. If the applicant is not in conformance with the AFF Standards, it could jeopardize the continuing certification of the larger Group Organization.

At such time that the applicant is deemed to be in conformance with the AFF Standards, then the applicant can become a member of the Group Organization. The Group Manager *must* document the acceptance of new Group Members into the Group Organization. Documented acceptance of the new Group Member will include a completed and signed Application for Membership, form (GO-01) and the Group Members name will be added to the Green Timber Tree Farm Group Membership List. The Group Member will also be sent a Green Timber Tree Farm Group Membership Certificate once they have been successfully enrolled into the Green Timber Tree Farm Group.

4.6 Pioneer Tree Farm Status

Pioneer Tree Farm Status will not be used. Applicants will either be accepted as full members into the Group Organization or will need to achieve the applicable requirements of the AFF Standards prior to entry into the Group Organization.

4.7 Maintaining Membership in the Group

The Group Manager needs to ensure that appropriate records are maintained, both for administering the Group Organization and for purposes of Group Certification audits and re-audits. The Group Manager *must* maintain an electronic or hard copy file on each



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Group Member. The Group Manager will maintain copies of the Application for Membership (GO-01), AFF Standards Monitoring Checklist (GO-04), any applicable CAR forms (GO-06), and any other appropriate information.

The Group Manager will ensure that any new Group Members are added to membership and mailing lists, are invoiced for any applicable fees, receive appropriate information from the American Tree Farm System, and take care of any other administrative details. Annual updating of information to the ATFS is addressed in Section 4.12.

The Group Manager will also periodically monitor the forest management plans and activities of the Group Members to ensure that they continue to conform to the AFF Standards. Management plans will be updated at least every 10 years. (See Section 4.9 addressing ongoing monitoring)

4.8 Training and Education

Group Managers should evaluate training needs of the Group Organization and individual Group Members to ensure sufficient knowledge to implement and achieve the AFF Standards. Group Managers should periodically assess the need for technical forestry training including implementation of BMPs, silvicultural techniques appropriate to the area, relevant laws and regulations, fish and wildlife protection, etc.

The Group Manager should consider conducting training regarding the AFF Standards, the ATFS Group Certification Process, the audit process and possible audit findings, and the corrective action process. This training can be intensive or extensive, and can be held for both staff of the Group Organization and/or individual Group Members that take an active role in the management of their timberlands.

Group Managers are encouraged to periodically evaluate professional education opportunities addressing internal auditing, business management, and other applicable fields. The Group Manager should work with the State Tree Farm Committee(s) to organize and coordinate educational workshops and field days. The Group Manager will address trainings in the yearly newsletter.

4.9 Monitoring

The Group Manager *must* establish a procedure and schedule for conducting ongoing monitoring of the Group Member's conformance with the AFF Standards. Group Managers and/or internal auditors conducting internal monitoring *must* have completed the ATFS Tree Farm Inspector training course. The schedule should allow for annual visits to a sample of properties, or as the Group Manager or designee provides technical assistance and other services to the Group Members.



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4.9.1 Monitoring Schedule

Member Declaration:

The Group Manager will mail each group member the Annual Member Inquire, form (GO –11) by December 1st of each year. This form will be used to document any changes in the Tree Farm and will be used to request services from Green Timber Consulting Foresters, Inc. if desired.

Group Monitoring:

The Group Manager, or qualified designee, will conduct and monitor continuing conformance to the standard using the following guidelines.

1. During the first quarter of every 5th year (the year previous to the group audit) a random sample will be drawn from the properties enrolled in the Green Timber Tree Farm Group to be monitored. This sample will represent 25% of the total number of properties enrolled in each county serviced by the Green Timber Tree Farm Group.
2. Properties that are drawn for monitoring will be visited within that year by the group manager or other representative that has completed the American Tree Farm System (ATFS) Tree Farm Inspector Training.
3. In addition, every 10 years, each property will be visited to update the forest management plan, at this time the property will also be internally audited.
4. While visiting the property the group manager or other qualified representative will fill out the American Forest Foundation (AFF) Monitoring Checklist (GO-04) to document the monitoring process and to report appropriate findings to the individual group member.
5. If the landowner is found to be in compliance with the AFF standards a copy of the monitoring checklist will be made and sent to the landowner. The original copy of the monitoring checklist will be placed in the landowners file and held by the group manager.
6. If a non-compliance is found a Corrective Action Request form (GO-06) will be completed. The Corrective Action Request form will describe the non-compliance, define the corrective actions to be followed (Corrective Action Plan), identify the cause of the non-compliance and set a timeline for the non-compliance to be corrected. The Corrective Action Plan will then be reviewed by the group manager and if suitable, approved. Continued monitoring will take place to ensure that the corrective actions are being carried out properly and in a timely fashion. Once the non-compliance is corrected and the Corrective Action Request form is completed, a copy of the Corrective Action Request form will be made and sent to the landowner. The original copy will be placed in the landowners file and held by the group manager.



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These guidelines can also be found in form (GO-13), Monitoring Procedure.

4.10 Departure from the Group

Group Managers need to ensure that Group Members are committed to long-term forest management in conformance with the AFF Standards. If the Group Member elects to sell the property for whatever reason, or decides to withdraw from the Group Organization, the Group Manager must remove the member from the roster or list of Group Members.

The Group Organization must maintain a procedure for expelling the Group Member if they do not meet the requirements of the Standard, and are not willing or able to take appropriate corrective action. The formal procedure should outline the circumstances which could trigger expulsion, the manner in which the Group Member is informed of a potential non-conformance with the Standard, the procedures for working toward corrective action, actual expulsion from the Group, and a process for the member to appeal the expulsion ruling.

The Group Manager should document each step in the expulsion process to clearly outline the problem, allow time to correct the problem, check to ensure that corrective action has taken place, or notify the Group Member of their removal from the Group Organization. The notification of removal from the Group Organization should explain the appeals process, and that the expelled party can no longer claim membership in the Group Organization and certification to the AFF Standards.

The internal dispute process is available to a member who wants to appeal the expulsion decision.

4.10.1 Expulsion Procedure

The following outlines the circumstances that could lead to expulsion from the Green Timber Tree Farm Group and the procedure to follow when expelling individual members.

Circumstances Which Could Lead To Expulsion

1. Sale of the property
2. Landowner voluntarily decides to withdraw from the group
3. Failure to correct issues that are in non-compliance with the American Forest Foundation Standard
4. Failure to pay yearly member dues
5. Failure to use Green Timber Consulting Foresters, Inc. or a pre-approved alternative service to conduct all forest management needs



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Expulsion procedure

1. If a landowner falls into one or more of the categories listed above he/she will be considered for expulsion from the Green Timber Tree Farm Group. A letter will be sent from the group manager to the landowner describing the issue(s) and the actions that need to be taken to correct them. A copy of the Green Timber Tree Farm Group Expulsion Procedure will be attached to the letter. A copy of the letter will be made and kept in the landowners file held by the group manager.
2. The landowner will then be given 30 days to develop a corrective action plan, lay out a timeline for project completion and begin taking action to correct the issue(s). The group manager must approve the corrective action plan.
3. If the group manager does not hear from the individual group member within the 30 days or if the individual member decides not to take corrective action the group manager shall fill out the Green Timber Tree Farm Group Notice of Expulsion form (GO-15) and send it to the landowner.
4. Once the Green Timber Tree Farm Group Notice of Expulsion is sent and received by the landowner that landowner is no longer considered part of the Green Timber Tree Farm Group and the Membership Roll (GO-08) will have to be update to reflect the changes.

If a landowner feels that he/she is being wrongfully expelled from the Green Timber Tree Farm Group by the group manager then he/she has the right to appeal the group managers' decision. The outline for appeals can be found in document (GO-16), Dispute/Appeals Procedure which can be obtained from the group manager.

4.11 Maintaining Group Records

The Group Manager will be responsible for maintaining access to, and control of, all written records and documents. The Group Manager, on behalf of the Group Organization, will maintain a document control system to ensure that each Group Member knows which is the current version of all relevant documents. Each relevant document should be assigned a current issue number and a last revision date. This will be done on the Green Timber Tree Farm Group Document List (GO-09). All Green Timber Tree Farm Documents will be on the Green Timber Company computer network.

When documents are updated, the previous version will be removed from the network, and the new document inserted in its place. Only the current version of a document should be kept on file and used by the Group Organization and Group Members.

4.12 Annual Reporting to the American Tree Farm System



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The American Tree Farm System requires Group Organizations to annually update certain information regarding the Group Organization including: number of landowners and acreage in the program, new entries and departures from the membership, and other information. The annual reporting information is contained in form (GO-07) – Group Organization Annual Reporting.

The Group Manager *must* submit the annual reports to the American Tree Farm System by the designated date, and maintain copies of past annual reports on file. Failure to submit the annual report to the ATFS would constitute a non-conformance and may result in revocation of the ATFS Group Certification

4.13 Managing the Group Certification Process

The Group Manager should make appropriate preparations for the independent certification of the Group Organization and its Group Members by an ATFS accredited Certification Body. The first step is ensuring that the Group Members are achieving all of the AFF Standards, Core Performance Measures and Primary Indicators and the overall Group Organization is meeting the requirements contained herein. This can be accomplished by conducting internal monitoring of the Group Members and inspecting new members. The monitoring of conformance can be done as a regular part of providing land management and timber harvesting services to the Group Members. (See Section 4.9)

The Group Manager should ensure that the appropriate indicators and supporting objective evidence is available to demonstrate that the Group Organization and its Group Members are in conformance with the AFF Standards. The Group Manager should work with the Group Members to ensure that the AFF Standards are implemented and are appropriate to the scope and scale of their properties.

The Group Manager should provide the main contact between the Group Organization and the Certification Body. Communication about logistical arrangements for the audit, audit schedules, field visits and interviews, findings and conclusions, and decisions regarding corrective action should be between the Group Manager and the Lead Auditor of the Certification Body.

The Group Manager should receive the Final ATFS Group Certification Audit Report from the Certification Body and communicate the findings to the Group Organization and Group Members. If a certification audit results in a Corrective Action Request, the Group Manager *must* coordinate with the Group Organization and/or individual Group Members to develop corrective action plans and work to ensure timely implementation. Once the Certification Body issues the ATFS Certificate, the Group Manager should hold the certificate on behalf of the Group Organization.



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The Group Manager should also be responsible for maintaining current and accurate records from the audit process. Some of the records that should be kept include:

1. A list of Group Members that were part of the ATFS Certification Audit
2. The total number of acres included within the scope of the Audit
3. A copy of the Final Report and any Corrective Action Requests issued by the Certification Body
4. Copies of Corrective Action Plans that are implemented to “Close Out” the CAR
5. Evidence of monitoring the Corrective Action to ensure the same problem does not recur
6. Notifications from Group Members of their departure from the Group Organization

Section 5. The Group Member

Group Members, which constitute the qualified participants and/or their designee, make up the Group Organization. Each Group Member is responsible for implementing the requirements of the AFF Standards, Core Performance Measures, Primary Indicators and any policies and procedures specified by the Group Organization. This involves working either independently or with the Group Manager to ensure that forest practices are properly implemented, maintain an up-to-date management plan, and provide objective evidence demonstrating that the AFF Standards and Core Performance Measures have been achieved.

5.1 Application

New qualified participants that are interested in joining an existing certified Group Organization should be encouraged by the Group Manager to complete an application (See GO-01 – Application for Membership) and submit the application to the Group Organization.

As part of the application process, the Group Member indicates their consent to voluntarily become part of the Group Organization, the time frame covering the agreement, authorization for the Group Manager(s) and auditors to access the property, and authorization to be part of a Group Application for independent certification to the AFF Standards.

5.2 Monitoring and Auditing

The Group Member should be prepared and agree to have his or her property periodically monitored and audited to assess conformance with the AFF Standards. The Group



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Manager or an independent Certification Body may conduct the monitoring and/or auditing. The Group Member may want to be present for each of these visits, or can arrange to have the Group Manager or his/her designee present to address technical forestry and other details.

The Group Member should be prepared to provide certain information about the property to the Group Manager and Certification Body including: the number of acres involved, the silvicultural techniques that are practiced on the property, the landowner's long-term commitment to active ownership and management of the resource, a copy of the forest management plan, and any other pertinent information regarding the property.

5.3 Corrective Action

The Group Member should be prepared to develop a Corrective Action Plan contained on the Corrective Action Request (CAR) Form (GO-06), or equivalent procedure, if a major or minor non-conformance with the AFF Standards is identified by either the Group Manager or independent Certification Body. The Group Member needs to be willing and able to implement appropriate corrective action as specified on the CAR form, or risk possible expulsion from the Group Organization.

The Group Manager or Certification Body *must* document findings and evidence of non-conformance on a Corrective Action Request (CAR) form, or equivalent procedure. The Group Member, with the possible assistance of the Group Manager, would then prepare a Corrective Action Plan addressing how the immediate impacts would be mitigated, what the root cause of the non-conformance was, the timeframe for completing the corrective action, and how future non-conformances can be prevented. The Group Member should then sign the Corrective Action Plan (CAP) and submit it to the Group Manager or Certification Body for review and approval.

5.4 Departure from the Group Organization

Group Members should be committed to long-term forest management and membership in the Group Organization. If the Group Member decides to sell the property and/or resign from the Group Organization, immediate written notification should be provided to the Group Manager.

If the Group Member no longer chooses to conform to the requirements of the AFF Standards, he/she should voluntarily withdraw from the Group Organization.

If the Group Manager or other Group Members become concerned that a Group Member is consistently out of conformance with the AFF Standards, an on-site monitoring visit should be conducted to confirm the potential non-conformance. If a non-conformance is found, a CAR form should be completed and signed by the Group Member.



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If the Group Member fails to take corrective action within the specified timeframe, the Group Manager, on behalf of the Group Organization, may ask the Group Member to voluntarily withdraw from the Group Organization. The Group Manager and Group Members should work in a positive and collaborative manner to address any findings of non-conformance and to correct any problems. The formal expulsion process should be used only as a last resort.

5.5 Active Participation in the Group Organization

Group Members are encouraged to be actively involved in the Group Organization and to promote sustainable forestry. Group Members can be active by serving on committees, providing training to other landowners, hosting tours on their property, contributing to any newsletters or publications, and being active in the ATFS Group Certification Process.

Group Members are also encouraged to be actively involved in the State Tree Farm Committee and Program. A major advantage of Group Certification is the positive peer influence of other dedicated Tree Farmers and the sharing of practical forestry experiences and knowledge. Group Members receive all of the same rights and benefits as individual Tree Farmers certified through the State Tree Farm Committees.

Section 6. Group Certification Process

In order to achieve ATFS Group Certification, the Group Organization is required to seek independent certification from an ANAB accredited Certification Body to document conformance with the AFF Standards and (SOP-01). Ideally, the Group Organization should implement the AFF Standards and (SOP-01) for a sufficient period of time to gain appropriate experience prior to undertaking the independent certification process. This high level of experience includes periodic monitoring of Group Member conformance, training of appropriate personnel, documentation of written evidence in an organized file, review of the effectiveness of the program, and continual improvement of the program over time.

6.1 Indicators Manual and Evidence File

The Group Organization may want to develop an ATFS Indicators and Evidence Manual outlining how each of the AFF requirements are being achieved. The Manual could include a description of the Objective Evidence to demonstrate to an independent third party that the AFF Standards are being achieved.

Objective Evidence can take the form of written documentation, interviews with appropriate personnel, and inspection of field sites to observe practices. The written



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documentation should be filed in a central Audit Evidence File so that it can be readily located and inspected.

6.2 Internal Review or Audit

Once the Group Manager is assured that the Group Organization and its Group Members are achieving conformance with the (SOP-01) and AFF Standards, the process of seeking independent ATFS Group Certification can proceed. The Group Organization may want to undergo an internal review or audit using the AFF Standards Monitoring Checklist (GO-04) and the Group Organization and Manager Monitoring Checklist (GO-05) to make sure that all required elements of the AFF Standards and (SOP-01) are in place and that objective evidence exists to demonstrate conformance.

Any internal review or audit should be conducted by a person(s) that is not involved in the day-to-day management of the Group Organization and can be objective in their evaluation. The internal audit should be used by the Group Organization to test its preparedness for the audit, to ensure that the scope of the Group Organization is well thought out and documented, and that there are no major non-conformances.

Conducting an internal pre-audit prior to the ATFS Group Certification Audit may help reduce the overall cost of the audit and lessen the possibility of findings of non-conformance. It is generally easier and more cost effective to enter the audit process assured that the AFF Standards and (SOP-01) are being achieved, than to have to prepare and implement Corrective Action Plans after an audit finding of non-conformance.

6.3 Application for Group Certification

Once the Group Manager is satisfied that the Group Organization and Group Members are in material conformance with (SOP-01) and the AFF Standards, the Group Organization can pursue independent certification. The Group Organization must complete the Application for Group Certification (GO-02) and file it with the ATFS for review and approval. The ATFS is requiring that all applications for Group Certification use (GO-02) to ensure efficiency and ease of processing.

An application fee is required for all Group Organization applications for ATFS Group Certification. The fee schedule is contained in (P&P-07) – ATFS: Group Certification fee Schedules.

The American Tree Farm System conducts an initial review of the application to make sure that it is complete. ATFS will then forward a letter of Confirmation of Readiness to the Group Organization with an attached list of accredited Certification Bodies. ATFS will also provide the Group Organization with an estimated annual fee that will be assessed during the first quarter of each calendar year. The initial assessment will be prorated based upon remainder of the calendar year.



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6.4 Selection of the Certification Body

The Group Organization may then request proposals from appropriate Certification Bodies to conduct the ATFS Group Certification. The Group Organization may want to provide the prospective Certification Bodies with a copy of the Application, its optional Indicators and Evidence Manual, or any other background information that would allow the Certification Bodies to prepare an accurate proposal and quote to conduct the Group Certification. The Group Organization is responsible for selecting the Certification Body to conduct the Group Certification.

6.5 Audit Preparation and Planning

Once the Group Organization has selected and contracted with a Certification Body to conduct the Group Certification, the lead auditor should contact the Group Manager to make appropriate arrangements, including: set tentative dates for the review of background documentation, prepare the audit plan, and conduct of the field audit. The lead auditor should work with the Group Manager to develop an appropriate audit plan that considers the scope and scale of the Group Organization, how many audit person days will be needed, the dates and locations of the audit, and the dates for completion of audit report and issuance of the ATFS Group Certificate.

The Group Manager should also work with the lead auditor who will select field sites for inspection, as well as Group Members and other personnel that may serve as interviewees. The Group Manager should contact a representative list of Group Members to ensure their availability during the audit, check access to field sites, and make appropriate preparations for the field audit. The Group Manager and selected Group Members should serve as escorts for the Certification Body and its audit team members and provide other logistical and technical support.

The Group Manager should review the audit plan and details of the audit process with the lead auditor prior to the field audit. The Group Manager should be notified prior to the audit if there appears to be any incomplete documentation and possible major non-conformances. Appropriate preparation and planning will help ensure that the audit process proceeds smoothly, efficiently and economically.

6.6 Group Certification Process

Knowledge of the Group Certification Process by the Group Manager and Group Members will help avoid surprises and allow the responsible personnel to more fully engage in the discussions around conformance with the AFF Standards.

The Group Manager should be the focal point for communication with the lead auditor during the field audit. The Group Manager should ensure that the audit plan is followed, that audit findings are appropriately documented, that any disputes are appropriately



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handled, and that overall audit procedures are followed. The Group Manager should also be ready to develop Corrective Action Plans if a non-conformance is identified and documented by the Certification Body.

The Group Manager may also want to review the Final Report for accuracy and appropriate documentation. If the Group Organization wants to communicate its conformance with the AFF Standards and (SOP-01), it may develop a Summary Report in consultation with the Certification Body to ensure that it is a fair representation of audit findings.

6.7 Group Certificate, Tree Farm Signage, and Public Claims

The Group Manager should receive a Letter of Certification from the Group Certification Body within two weeks of the issuance of the final report. The ATFS then assigns a Certificate Number. The Certification Body is responsible for issuing any Certificates of Conformance with the AFF Standards.

The Group Manager can then work with ATFS to obtain an appropriate number of Tree Farm Signs for posting. The Group Manager should work with the Group Members to display the Tree Farm Signs at locations and in a manner consistent with the ATFS Signage Use Guidelines (P&P-06 and Section 3.3 of SOP-01, Group Membership Fees).

The Group Manager is responsible for making sure that any public claims about the independent certification are accurate and truthful, and consistent with truth in advertising guidelines. The Group Manager should forward a copy of any communication to the certification body. The Group Manager may issue a press release, conduct tours, and otherwise communicate the fact that the Group Organization has achieved independent ATFS Group Certification. Use of the Tree Farm Logo should be in accordance with (P&P-05) – ATFS: Logo Use Guidelines.

6.8 Re-Certification

To maintain certification, the Group Manager *must* keep the Group Organization's program up-to-date and in ongoing conformance with (SOP-01) and the AFF Standards. This can be done as part of ongoing technical assistance and forest management services to the Group Members. Any Corrective Action Plans that were developed during the initial audit shall be monitored and closed according to the timeframes indicated on the Corrective Action Request form.

After four years of ongoing forest management and continual improvement, the Group Manager should begin preparations for the re-certification audit that *must* be conducted no later than the fifth year. ATFS will notify the Group Manager of the Group Organization when the date for re-certification expires.



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The Group Manager should update any Management Plans, Indicators and Evidence Manuals, Evidence Files or other documents in preparation for the re-certification. Outdated copies of written documentation, such as Best Management Practices Manuals, should be removed from the active files and from other places of use. Documents that need to be retained for legal and other legitimate purposes, consistent with the document retention policy, should be so indicated and filed.

The Group Manager should periodically check with ATFS for the most up-to-date copies of the Group Certification Process documents. Outdated copies should be removed from circulation and destroyed.

The Group Manager should document areas of continual improvement based upon experience, past audit findings, ongoing monitoring, and new research findings.

6.9 Auditor and Group Organization Disputes

The American Tree Farm System will maintain a Standards Interpretations Committee. In the event a dispute should arise between the Group Organization and Certification Body over interpretation of the AFF Standards or (SOP-01), the disputing parties should document their views and submit them in writing to the Director of ATFS within 45 days of the dispute. The Director shall forward the views of the disputing parties to the ATFS Standards Interpretation Committee. The Committee will generally respond within 45 days of written notification of the dispute. (See P&P-09, ATFS Standards Interpretation and Dispute Resolution Process). Official interpretations of the Standards Interpretation Committee are binding upon all parties to the dispute.



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